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RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI  
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1318  
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0266  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 001472

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/08/2017

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ALGERIA ANTI-EXTREMIST MESSAGING: BIG GOA ROLE,  
SMALL AMERICAN ONE.

REF: A. SECSTATE 115349

[1](#)B. RABAT 01487

[1](#)C. TUNIS 1211

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Algerian communication efforts to counter Al-Qaeda and religious extremism are serious and based on the premise that greater state involvement in religious life will prevent a return to the turmoil of 1990s. GOA messaging tactics are focused primarily through the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) on imam training, mosque construction and staffing, and message control, in addition to carefully selected moderate religious programming presented on state-run television. There is no question that the GOA shares the U.S. goal of undermining the ideological recruiting grounds for terrorists (ref A), as senior officials repeat time and again how few others recognize the problem as viscerally as they do. The GoA has leverage through salaries and the security services over much - if not most - of the sermonizing in the mosques. Anecdotal evidence and press reports suggest that GOA control over mosque messaging and Islam in Algeria is not fully successful. In addition, the GoA has little control over what young people watch on satellite television and the internet. Moreover, the underlying socio-economic discontent that fuels radicalization of many young people on religious grounds remains unaddressed. END SUMMARY.

"BETTER TO BE MANIPULATED BY THE RIGHT PEOPLE"

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[1](#)2. (C) PolEc Chief and Pol Specialist visited Abdellah Tamine, Counselor to the Minister and Director of Communications at the MoRA, on October 3. Tamine is known to be a more forward-looking and modern official, and is largely responsible for the MoRA's increased visibility and engagement with the press over the last year or two. Tamine explained that the vast majority of the population "are subject to manipulation" and easily confused by the internet, external influences and inaccurate religious messaging. He explained that religious extremism was able to tear the country apart in the 1990s because "the state was absent," and that the top priority of his ministry was to preserve national and religious unity, avoiding a return to the 1990s at all costs. By ensuring that Algerian imams are fully trained and Algerian Muslims are receiving messages of pure, moderate Islam at the mosque, terrorists will have a smaller pool of potential recruits from which to draw. As long as

manipulation is a given, "it is better to be manipulated by the right people," Tamine concluded.

#### THE MOSQUE FAR OUTREACHES THE INTERNET

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13. (C) Although it is growing at some 8 percent per year, internet penetration in Algeria remains at less than 3 percent of the population, according to Algerie Telecom. The MoRA therefore relies heavily on its control of mosque messaging to counter extremism. Tamine pointed out that every Friday, 17 million Algerians attend prayers and hear the Friday sermon. (Note: Post considers this figure to be an exaggeration; however, we do agree that the mosque has a greater reach than the internet in Algeria. End note.) This "human internet" then has the potential to reach the remainder of the country's population of 35 million by discussing what they have heard with just one other person. Meanwhile, the MoRA cooperates with the Ministry of Communication to present moderate religious programming on state-run television. The Friday prayer from either Algiers or the Emir Abdel Qader mosque in Constantine is televised, and two weekly religious programs address social issues. Fatawa 'ala el Hawa'a is a Thursday question and answer program moderated by an imam, in which two sheikhs answer viewer's questions about social issues such as divorce. Fada'a el Joma'a, aired after the Friday prayer, features often non-Algerian Islamic scholars discussing themes such as educational reform and self-improvement. Both programs call for moderation and dialogue.

#### STAFFING CRISIS A MAJOR OBSTACLE

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14. (C) Tamine explained that the GOA was confident in its ability to disseminate messages of moderation to counter extremism and terrorist ideology, provided each mosque is fully staffed with a trained imam at the helm. Currently, a dramatic mosque staffing crisis is the MoRA's highest priority. According to Tamine, it takes a staff of five to run a mosque, including the imam, muezzin (prayer caller), murshida (women's religious guide) and two others to assist with upkeep. The roughly 15 thousand mosques across Algeria are run by a combined staff of 22 thousand, far fewer than the 75 thousand the MoRA says are required. Tamine explained that at current budget levels, 500 mosque employees are added each year, meaning it would be well over a hundred years before Algeria's mosques are fully staffed, before even considering that an additional 3600 mosques are in development.

#### WANTED: IMAMS, SALARY COMPETITIVE

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15. (C) The Algerian press reported last week that the GOA was preparing to raise the salaries of imams in 2008 considerably more than expected increases in civil service salaries. Actual increases have not been officially announced in any sector, but the amount of the anticipated civil service wage increase is largely perceived as a litmus test of whether the GOA can redress economic discontent, decreased purchasing power and the perception that hydrocarbon wealth is not trickling down to the masses. Tamine said that the MoRA was eager to recruit new imams, and was doing everything it could to make salaries stand out from the civil service, although he was careful not to commit to specific numbers. Salaries, he acknowledged, were part of the recruiting strategy the GOA hoped to use to compete with the incentives offered by religious extremists.

16. (C) Increasing salaries, Tamine said, are also the primary tool to prevent the politicization of imams. It is only natural, according to Tamine, for political parties to recognize the influence of the mosque by trying to buy imam

loyalty in the form of sermons sympathetic to their particular party. Although the degree of the expected salary increase remains to be seen, the GOA hopes that these additional financial incentives will both increase imam recruitment and also decrease corruptibility.

THE MINBAR IS NOT OPEN TO JUST ANYONE  
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17. (C) The MoRA produces imams at eight religious schools around the country. Three years of study are generally sufficient to qualify an imam to deliver sermons and lead prayers. Tamine pointed out, however, that the MoRA carefully monitored who was allowed to speak at the minbar, with government officials attending the vast majority of Friday services across the country. Additional years of advanced study can lead to the rank of mufti, although there are only 12 muftis currently in Algeria, according to Tamine. While there were objective MoRA standards for the qualification of imams, assessing the credentials of a would-be mufti depends on a mix of experience, level of study and publications, much as an American university considers a professor for tenure.

NOT EVERYONE IS CONVINCED  
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18. (C) Anecdotal evidence and press reports suggest that all is not calm, and that GOA control over mosque messaging and Islam in Algeria is not fully successful. This control often serves as a source of resentment among a population which perceives Islam as just another area in which the GOA has placed daily life out of reach. According to Tamine, some 96 imams have been assassinated since 2000, and a foreign diplomat provided an unconfirmed report that a bomb was discovered and dismantled at the MoRA itself on September 25.

In addition, we have seen little evidence that the GoA can do much to limit what young Algerians find from Islamist websites or what they see on some of the harder-line Arabic satellite networks.

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WHAT THE U.S. CAN DO  
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19. (C) Television is the best way to reach the broad Algerian public, especially outside the largest cities. Embassy agrees with Rabat and Tunis recommendations (ref B and C) that the U.S. focus its television efforts on the pan-Arab satellite channels, and for Algeria al-Jazeera is the most important although other networks have viewships too. Algerian television itself is state-run, and even the most modest PD efforts to air material on Algerian television have been met with silence. Messages with visible U.S. fingerprints are not generally credible among Algerians, although post will continue to engage Algerian media on its activities across the board. (Most Embassy Algiers media engagement targets the dynamic and varied print media in order to influence the Algerian elite.)

110. (C) Embassy also recommends pursuing large-scale education and English-language initiatives as the most effective means of countering radicalization in Algeria, wherever the door is open to such programs. During October 7 meetings with Jared Cohen of the State Department's Policy Planning Office, for example, the Algerian Secretary Generals of the Ministries of Higher and National Education responded favorably to an initial "Teach for Algeria" proposal that seeks to export the success of Teach for America. Education administrators report heavy demand among students for English classes because young people - and our business sector contacts - think that command of English gives a young Algerian a far better chance of finding a job. Finally, by continuing to promote economic and political reform wherever opportunities exist within Algeria, the Embassy can help

address the root causes of disenchantment and radicalization, although the GOA must recognize this as the true front line by taking concrete and visible steps of its own.

COMMENT

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¶11. (C) Algeria's greatest fear is any kind of instability that could cause it to relive the turmoil of the 1990s. Set in this context, the question of radicalization and countering extremist and terrorist ideology in Algeria is largely - but not exclusively - one of socio-economic discontent. Islam, for now, is not the battleground to fight extremism and al-Qaeda recruitment in Algeria, the way it is in Europe and North America where imams are far less controlled by the state. Although GOA control over religious messaging is not absolute, the state-managed system joined with the credibility hit Islamists suffered from the 1990s, has been effective in limiting the influence of extremist messengers. The Embassy's diagnosis of potential radicalization hinges not upon the mosque, but by what the GOA has missed to date: the urgent need for political and economic reform. While the great majority of mosques reliably deliver anti-extremist messages millions every Friday, the credibility of these messages is still linked inexorably to popular perceptions of a government that has failed to address basic needs.

¶12. (C) Post points of contact on this issue will be Political-Economic Section Chief Mark Schapiro and Public Affairs Officer Rafik Mansour.  
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